

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost • September 18, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 16:1-15

“Stuffy”

Stuff can be pretty neat. Stuff might be shiny, soft, beautiful, big, small, speedy. Stuff can help you run faster, make you look better, let you work more efficiently, give you the ability to snap and show clearer photos than ever before. If there's a need, there's probably stuff somewhere to fill it. I like stuff. How about you?

Stuff can be pretty useful. Take a moment here and think about the stuff that has made your day today what it is. Stuff like a mattress, a car, a refrigerator, a phone, a toothbrush, a shirt, a book. I know I'd be hard pressed to remember every bit of stuff that I've used today, let alone this past week. I also know that if I didn't have all that stuff, my day would look far different. Stuff can enable you to do more, to experience more. It's no wonder that stuff can be pretty attractive.

Stuff can get pretty heavy, too. It builds up. **Life gets stuffy.** Life gets stuffy because you and I find ourselves wanting and getting more stuff. We want more stuff and get more stuff because the stuff that we have gets old. It fades and loses its allure. The shiny isn't as shiny as it once was. Something else comes into view that is softer, more beautiful, bigger, smaller, speedier. You're smartphone is great, right? It does everything that you need it to do, enabling activity that you'd never thought possible – until the newest model comes out, that is. (Yes, the iPhone 7 hit the stores this week, but no, I've no plans to get one!)

How are you putting your stuff to use? Does that stuff do what it was meant to do? Some of the time, stuff just sits around, collecting dust, lying forgotten, while other stuff gets used more than it was ever meant to be. Maybe you find yourself spending more time trying to get new stuff than you do using the stuff that you already have. How might all that look to someone on the outside? What would they think about how you use the stuff you have, how you manage it all? From their perspective, where would it look like you're putting your efforts? Your trust? Imagine that, if you weren't doing a very good job of managing stuff, it could all be taken away.

That's the situation that the steward faced in the story Jesus told. The steward, who depended on stuff to keep him going – his very job was about managing stuff – was going to be audited. Everything that this man had been doing as a manager of stuff was about to face intense scrutiny. The steward, though, wasn't planning to stick around for what the auditors' report: he knew that he was out of a job, and the window for any hope was quickly closing.

What would happen if you were audited? And what if the auditors didn't just look at your financial accounts but your whole life, how you put all that stuff to use? The audit has consequences: everything that you're not managing well would be taken away. What could you hope to have left?

Each of us falls short in managing our stuffy lives. To some extent, each of us trusts in stuff to make us feel better, to provide for ourselves and the people close to us. That's the way our society trains us to think: in the short term or long term, you're supposed to trust that the stuff you have is enough to meet your needs. That kind of thinking makes contentment an increasingly infrequently part of modern life. Why be happy with you have if you know, deep down, that it won't last? When all the stuff goes away, you're left empty-handed in more ways than one.

The steward in Jesus' story knows that he'll have to act quickly to secure a future for himself. Relying on his master's reputation as a merciful and gracious man, he calls on the people who owe his employer and brings them good news: “Your debt has been significantly reduced!” These people, probably farmers who've leased land from the lord and owe him a portion of their crops, think that the steward is acting as the lord's representative agent. They take him at his word, even if it might sound too good to be true. They go away owing a good deal less than they previously did, thinking well of the lord... and hopefully, the steward who acted as his agent. If the lord, once his servant's actions became known, were to reinstate the full debt owed him, who's going to look bad? The master's reputation as a merciful and gracious man would take a big hit. This steward was shrewd, indeed.

The steward's future relies on his lord's mercy. We've already seen that this lord is merciful: when he found out that his steward had been mismanaging that which didn't belong to him, he didn't jail or otherwise punish his servant. The steward knew that he could not save himself from the consequences of his mismanagement of stuff. As it turns out, the steward's trust in his master's reputation was justified.

If you've been like the steward, putting your hope in stuff, the window for your future hasn't yet closed.

Jesus instructs his disciples to make prudent, astute use of their stuff. Like the steward, what we have to manage isn't really ours but our Lord's. Back in the time of the prophet Amos, the people had also forgotten that truth. They cheated the poor and needy, exploiting them for ill-gotten gain, when they should have been treating them fairly and caring their fellow Hebrews with compassion. This temptation to cheat and misuse worldly wealth apparently isn't limited to any one time or place, and Jesus knows it.

As Jesus told his disciples, *"No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and [stuff]."* (Luke 16:13) The word that Jesus used wasn't "stuff," but "mammon." That's worldly wealth, the stuff with which we surround ourselves in life, stuff that can all too easily tempt you to put your hope in it, dedicate your time and energy to collecting more and more of it. There's such thing as a divided loyalty: you can either serve God or serve stuff. Stuff isn't a secure foundation for certainty in this uncertain world. But your Lord is.

Like the shrewd steward, you have a Lord with a reputation for acting with mercy and grace. It's a well-earned reputation. His mercy and grace shows most prominently on the cross from which Jesus would hang not long after teaching his disciples with this story of the steward. Because there on the cross, the Lord does more than reduce your debt to him: he wipes it out. There on the cross, your Lord pays your debt at the cost of his own, perfect life. There on the cross, Jesus secures your future.

When your future's secure, you don't have to have a stuffy life. The things of this world are mammon, "things of unrighteousness," and they're not going to last. Jesus' disciples, as he says, have true riches that will not wear out and pass away. You have that eternal joy of life with God entrusted to you, and it's yours to share.

God's kingdom has broken in to our stuffy world in Christ. Our merciful and gracious lord now allows his people – you included – to his representative agents. Even using mammon, the temporary wealth of this life, you can give others a glimpse of the joy that comes from a restored life with God. You can use the passing riches of stuff in the service of people around you for the sake of your Lord's kingdom. Even here, opportunities abound. We have a Helping Hands Fund for households within our congregation who are in need of emergency assistance. We partner with the Koinonia Foundation to offer God's care to our neighbors in Franconia. We're looking ahead to welcoming a refugee family who will be coming into our community with very little or no stuff at all. How will you use your stuff?

Stuff can be pretty neat. Neater still, though, is your Lord's mercy and grace. They bring the true, lasting riches to you so that you can have hope for the future. Because unlike the fading things of a stuffy life, the riches you have through Jesus will last forever.

Amen.